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The Return of the Omniscient Narrator

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CHAPTER 2

The Direct Address and the Ironic Moralist

The contexts, the great forms of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sagas, have been exhausted; realism and experimentation have come and gone without seeming to point to a way ahead. The contemporary writer, therefore, must combine these veins, calling on the strengths of the Victorian novel together with the alienations of post-modernism.

—Martin Amis, *The War against Cliché* 78–79

ALTHOUGH book reviews and scholarly articles on individual works of fiction may mention their use of omniscient narration, general accounts of the phenomenon of contemporary omniscience are virtually nonexistent. The few attempts to distinguish between classic and contemporary omniscience that I have found have come from teachers of creative writing. In *The Power of Point of View: Make Your Story Come to Life* (2008), Alicia Rasley argues that “classical omniscient” has “attitude and persona,” an “ironic, all-wise, witty voice commenting on events” (14), whereas “contemporary omniscient” “eliminates the narrative persona, though not the narrative control” (140). This formulation replicates the standard distinction between overt Victorian omniscience and covert modernist omniscience (or editorial and neutral omniscience in Friedman’s terms) and hence is at odds with the phenomenon I am concerned with here.

In the previous chapter I argued that literary omniscience must be understood as more than a narrator’s complete knowledge of the fictional world, evidenced by access to the consciousness of characters. I also

argued that the narrative authority of omniscience cannot be understood in purely formalist terms as a narrator's possession of this knowledge (focalization), by virtue of his or her ontological distinction from characters (voice). If we take access to consciousness as the defining feature of omniscience, then virtually all third-person narrators are omniscient, and we become mired in epistemological debates about full or partial omniscience. In my approach, omniscient narrators are distinguished from other heterodiegetic narrators by the extent to which they rhetorically perform this conventional authority. That is, we cannot assume omniscience as a default quality of authorial narrators; it must be manifested in overt displays of zero focalization (saying something no character could know) and extranarrative statements which establish the intrusive presence of the narrator. Approaching narrative authority less as the capacity to report reliably on the story world, and more as a type of narratorial status produced by a relational exchange between agents in the communication model, I have argued that the authority of omniscient narrators, by virtue of their function as a proxy for the author, is contingent upon a particular figure of authorship. The reason the intrusive omniscient narrator of Victorian fiction is said to have fallen out of favor in the twentieth century was that its narrative status lost cultural authority in an age of relativism. The authorial figure projected by omniscient narrators in contemporary fiction can thus be archaic or (post)modern depending on the rhetorical performance of this voice.

On this basis, the distinction I am making between classic and contemporary omniscience is not simply a periodizing one between novels written before the twentieth century and novels written since the 1990s. The fact that a novel has been published recently does not necessarily make it contemporary. I am mindful here of John Barth's claim in his 1967 essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion," that a "good many current novelists write turn-of-the-century-type novels, only in more or less mid-twentieth-century language and about contemporary people and topics; this makes them considerably less interesting (to me) than excellent writers who are also technically contemporary" (30). Even Barth's classic metafictional short story "Lost in the Funhouse" (1968) cannot be considered a technically contemporary example of metafiction in comparison to David Foster Wallace's "Octet," which introduces extra levels of irony as it self-consciously wrangles with the legacy of postmodernism.

By contemporary omniscient narration, then, I mean works of fiction in which intrusive third-person narrators demonstrate an awareness of the influence of postmodernism on the figure of authorship which

their narrative voices project. In this sense, there may be works written today which employ omniscient narration but are not contemporary in their use of the form. Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) would be one such example of classic omniscience, modeling its form on the Victorian novel. Richard Russo's defense of omniscience suggests that it has always been the unacknowledged mainstream of narrative fiction in the twentieth century. This may be true if we accept third-person narratives with multiple perspectives and an unobtrusive voice, such as Russo's *Empire Falls* (2003), as omniscient. However, I have established greater emphasis on the performance of omniscience through intrusive presence and zero focalization to clarify the term and delimit the field, and my focus here is on novels whose omniscience differs from classic omniscience as a result of their aesthetic and intellectual relation to the legacy of postmodernism.

Russo's defense stems from the assumption by writers, literary critics, and theorists that omniscient narration is an outmoded relic of the Victorian novel; an assumption which has exerted tremendous influence on the production and reception of literary works for the past century, from the history of decline which I mapped out in the previous chapter, to the prevailing aesthetic prejudice which underpins the "practical" advice against the form dispensed in writing programs, to the professional advice of agents and publishers, to the response of reviewers. In other words, in the same way that the anxiety of obsolescence, as Kathleen Fitzpatrick describes it, operates discursively to enable certain statements about the state of the novel, the critical narrative of the obsolescence of omniscience constructs a blind spot in which omniscient narration is not recognized as an element of contemporary literary culture. When contemporary works of fiction are discussed, their use of omniscience is not considered important, or it is seen to complicate the contemporaneity of the work. For instance, Matthew Paproth claims, in "The Flipping Coin: The Modernist and Postmodernist Zadie Smith":

The problem with classifying Smith's fiction, then, is its determinedly straightforward, traditional presentation of narrative and its relatively uncomplicated narrative voice. Rather than presenting us with the kind of tortured unremitting narratives that Beckett presents us with, or with the kind of mixed-up chutnified narrative that Rushdie presents us with, Smith's narratives are leisurely paced, elegantly structured, and written from the perspective of a confident omniscient narrator. (14)

Again we have the assumption that omniscience is a form of narration and an authorial posture so encrusted with Victorian sensibilities that

any use of its conventions can only be understood as nostalgic conservatism or ironic critique. The books I am concerned with here may demonstrate some kind textual self-consciousness of the form but are neither nostalgic revivals (in an unreflective or ironic fashion) or parodic metafictional critiques, so much as they are hyperbolic or agonistic searches for new modes of narrative authority. The novels I have chosen to study, furthermore, are embedded in the governing institutions of literary fiction. They possess cultural capital by virtue of being objects of discussion around which a discursive formation or a paratext accumulates, and exert some pressure on the way in which the novel circulates as an art form and cultural artifact in public life. In other words, I'm interested in the contribution of omniscient narration to current debates on the status of the novel as an art form in the wake of postmodernism and on the function of authors in public discourse.

Omniscience, Metafiction, and Postmodernism

I want now to briefly sketch the ways in which postmodern experimentation has influenced contemporary omniscience. Invoking the term “postmodern” is inevitably fraught with problems of definition, and I follow critical custom in asserting that its deployment in relation to fiction can only ever be provisional. The commonly accepted features of postmodern fiction include self-reflexivity, parody, irony, playfulness, pastiche, nonlinearity, and a general tendency for formal experimentation which challenges what Catherine Belsey, in *Critical Practice*, called “expressive realism” (7–14). Some prominent definitions of postmodern fiction include: metafictional subversions of the relation between fiction and history (Hutcheon); fiction in which the generic dominant is a narrative foregrounding of ontological questions—as opposed to the epistemological dominant of modernism (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*); a tendency to favor diegesis over mimesis (Lodge, “Mimesis”); and, in a critique of formalist approaches, the global expansion of English language fiction in the wake of colonialism (Berube).

If we accept “postmodernism,” at the very least, as a periodizing term marking the cultural sensibility and general aesthetic accompanying the condition of postindustrial late capitalism, I will define postmodern fiction, for the purposes of this book, as an aesthetic move beyond the “exhaustion” of modernist experimentation without returning to traditional realism, and a cultural response to a perceived crisis of authority for the novel as a mode of public discourse, dramatized in the phrase “the

death of the novel.” David Lodge’s important 1969 essay, “The Novelist at the Crossroads” is a good starting point here, for it identifies three genres which emerged from the anxiety of writers faced with this situation. These genres are fabulism, or what became known as magic realism; the nonfiction novel, now sometimes called “faction,” or grouped under the broader term of “creative nonfiction”; and the problematic novel, now known as metafiction. What I would like to suggest is that Lodge’s three genres are examples of postmodern experimentation with narrative voice which opened up the possibility for reintroducing omniscient narration in literary fiction.

The privileged mode of postmodern fiction is without doubt metafiction. As Patricia Waugh claims: “Although metafiction is just one form of postmodernism, nearly all contemporary experimental writing displays *some* explicitly metafictional strategies” (22). Metafiction itself takes a variety of forms, but many examples, such as Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse,” overtly assert the presence of an omniscient narrator by virtue of the characteristic authorial intrusions which draw attention to the act of writing: “The boy’s father was tall and thin, balding, fair-complexioned. Assertions of that sort are not effective; the reader may acknowledge the proposition, but. We should be much farther along than we are; something has gone wrong; not much of this preliminary rambling seems relevant” (79). As Wenche Ommundsen claims, in *Metafictions?*: “The ostentatious, intrusive narrator or author-figure, interrupting the story to air his or her preoccupations with the processes of fiction-writing, is perhaps the most explicit way of expressing a reflexive awareness” (7–8).

It is precisely the intrusive presence of the author in Victorian omniscience which modernist poetics reacted against. Henry James, of course, famously excoriated Trollope for the reflexivity of his authorial voice, for parading his creative omnipotence in direct addresses to the reader. “In a digression, a parenthesis or an aside,” James laments,

he concedes to the reader that he and this trusting friend are only “making believe.” He admits that the events he narrates have not really happened, and that he can give his narrative any turn the reader may like best. Such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me, I confess, a terrible crime. (“The Art” 71)

If omniscient narration can be defined as an authorial narrator’s rhetorical performance of narrative authority manifested most overtly in self-reflexive, intrusive commentary, then postmodern metafiction which does the same is surely omniscience with teeth in it. Furthermore, the attention

drawn to the armature of fiction by the self-reflexivity of the form establishes a link between author and narrator.

Barth's postmodern manifesto "Literature of Exhaustion" is the key document here, suggesting that technically contemporary novelists could reclaim the pleasures of plot and narrative as long as they built an ironic awareness of this reclamation into the narrative. John Fowles's meta-fictional classic, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, is a good example of how this postmodern stance might relate to omniscient narration and its association with the Victorian novel. After twelve chapters in which the authorial narrator of Fowles's novel diligently mimics the voice of a Victorian novel, we have this famous confessional intrusion:

I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and "voice" of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does. But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word. (85)

The French Lieutenant's Woman is typically characterized as a meta-fictional parody of the Victorian novel. However, it can also be seen as a self-conscious attempt to revive the pleasures of the form. In his "Notes on an Unfinished Novel" Fowles wrote: "We suspect people who pretend to be omniscient; and that is why so many twentieth-century novelists feel driven into first person narration. . . . But in this new book, I shall try to resurrect this technique" (153). Of course, the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, as we are told in a direct address to the reader, has the problem of dealing with omniscience in "the age of Barthes and Robbe-Grillet" (85). In other words, an omniscient narrator in the twentieth century cannot be the same as an omniscient narrator in previous centuries. An awareness of this fact is what underpins contemporary omniscience.

After Postmodernism

The same period that I have identified as marking the return of omniscience in contemporary fiction, from the 1990s to the present, has also been described as the period in which postmodern literature gave way to

the post-postmodern, or at least another iteration of postmodernism. For instance, in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* Barry Lewis clearly demarcates 1990 as the end of postmodernist writing as the dominant mode of literature (95). Post-postmodern literature has typically been defined as fiction which owes some debt of influence to, or at least demonstrates a textual awareness of, the major works and characteristics of postmodernism, but which attempts to put this legacy of experimentation in the service of more humanist concerns. If metafiction was the privileged genre of postmodernism, its critique forms the engine of what is now being called post-postmodernism: characterized as an attempt to move beyond the “exhausted” form of metafiction and the dead-end of formal experimentation which was its legacy (McLaughlin, Burn). This impulse has informed a return to or reworking of traditional forms and narrative (Hoffmann); a less fraught engagement with popular culture, such as embracing the language of the everyday or drawing inspiration from comic books, rather than operating within an anticapitalist mode of critique (Hoberek); and a more humanistically oriented exploration of the self, rather than a critique of the subject, including the ethical questions this involves (Timmer). These accounts of post-postmodernism share three features: the periodizing (from the 1990s); the generational (a younger group of writers who came to prominence in this period); and the combinatorial (a synthesis of classical realist form with elements of postmodern experimentation).

The features of post-postmodernism have all been described in both British and American fiction, by Vera Nunning, in “Beyond Indifference: New Departures in British Fiction at the Turn of the 21st Century,” and Stephen J. Burn in “The End of Postmodernism: American Fiction at the End of the Millennium.” Burn describes how throughout the last decade of the twentieth century a critical mass of artists and theorists prosecuted claims for the demise of postmodernism as a movement, partly because its continued semantic diffuseness lacked explanatory force, and partly because it failed to adapt to the contemporary media ecology, with its characteristic self-reflexivity losing its avant-garde dynamism when metafictional strategies became absorbed and co-opted by mainstream popular culture and marketing.

My argument for locating contemporary omniscience within this broad concept of the post-postmodern, indeed for suggesting it is the exemplary voice of this impulse, is predicated on two claims. First, if postmodernism, by foregrounding the presence of an author-narrator (the metafictionist, the fabulist, and the journalist) self-reflexively revived the omniscient

narrator, then this became the point of departure for contemporary writers. Secondly, this authorial presence can be read as symptomatic of the post-postmodern novelistic anxiety over the cultural relevance of fiction produced by the institutional conditions of literary culture which I outlined in the introduction. Two common critiques of postmodernism, its empty formal experimentation and its rejection of the concept of character, are founded on the claim that these features render the novel irrelevant to public discourse. Contemporary omniscient narration emerges from an attempt to engage with the insights of postmodernism while reconfiguring the authority of the novelist in the public sphere.

In suggesting that contemporary omniscience can be characterized as post-postmodern, I don't want to argue that this marks the end of postmodernism as a literary enterprise, a cultural sensibility, or a mode of critical and philosophical thinking. But I do want to show how some of the forms identified as postmodern have been further extended by contemporary writers, regardless of whether these writers are given generational labels of postmodern or post-postmodern. I propose, then, four permeable and overlapping modes of narrative authority which contemporary omniscience relies upon, and whose postmodern lineage can be traced back to Lodge's genres: (1) the *Ironic Moralist*; (2) the *Literary Historian*; (3) the *Pyrotechnic Storyteller*; and (4) the *Immersion Journalist* and *Social Commentator*.

In analyzing these four modes I will pay attention to two aspects of narrative voice: first, the formal manifestations of "authorial" presence from evaluative commentary on characters, to aphoristic statements about "human nature," to self-relexive addresses to the reader; and secondly, how this commentary configures the narrative voices around modes of authority different from that of the novelist in classic omniscience. In many cases I will draw upon some of the nonfictional extra literary statements of authors to demonstrate their vital role in establishing the narrative authority of their fiction in the public sphere.

The Ironic Moralist

The first mode of contemporary omniscience, the *ironic moralist*, grapples self-reflexively with the legacy of the "universalizing" moral authority of classic omniscience, and it does so in the shadow of metafiction. The self-reflexivity in this mode, in which the narrator's intrusive authority is constantly paraded, is less concerned with exposing the artifice of

fiction, than with the problem of how to assert the universal in relation to the particular. The narratorial direct address is the main device used to engage with this problem: demonstrating an anxiety over the extent to which moral commentary can be taken as authoritative. Any discussion of contemporary omniscience must begin with the direct address, one of the key features of classic omniscient authority, and the feature most criticized for working against dramatization. To recall Leon Edel's claim: "In the old novels the omniscient author was nearly always present and nearly always addressing an audience" (138). I have already discussed Martin Amis's *The Information* in this context. The other examples I will examine here are David Foster Wallace's story "Octet" and Adam Thirlwell's *Politics*.

The narrator of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* can also be classified as an ironic moralist. As I pointed out in the introduction, this narrator self-consciously asserts his omniscient status, indeed literalizes the metaphor of a godlike narrator by claiming to be God. At the same time, he complicates his moral authority by virtue of presiding over a magic realist world in which he hints that he may also be the devil: "Who am I? Let's put it this way: who has the best tunes?" (10). There has been some debate about the nature and function of narrative voice in this novel, with scholars such as James Harrison and Keith M. Booker identifying what they call a satanic narrator at play. Roger Clark provides an overview of this debate in his book, *Stranger Gods: Salman Rushdie's Other Worlds*, before arguing: "While it is something of a simplification to say that the text has *only two* narrative voices, I would argue that it has a conventional, omniscient narrator as well as an otherworldly satanic narrator" (134). Clark characterizes the satanic narrator as an insidious covert presence in the novel, a puppeteer who wields an omnipotent hand at the diegetic level: "the satanic narrator possesses Chamcha then uses him to manipulate Gibreel" (144). At the same time, his satanic pride compels him to announce his presence at the extradiegetic level, surfacing in various direct addresses which undermine the unity and control of the conventional omniscient narrator: "I know; devil talk. Shaitan interrupting Gibreel. Me?" (93).

Certainly Rushdie's narrator encourages readers to entertain doubts about his nature, and the purposes of his narration. In a broader sense, however, the "satanic" narratorial intrusions are ludic distractions from a desire to assert universal statements about human nature, even as the narrator performs postcolonial critiques of the empire. While the title refers to the apocryphal story of the devil reciting passages of the Koran to Muhammed, this reference is given a more quotidian parallel in the form

of Saladin Chamcha's desire to gain revenge on Gibreel Farishta for abandoning him to the authorities when they first fell from their burst plane to the shores of England. Chamcha inflames Gibreel's murderous jealousy through a series of anonymous phone calls in which he whispers lines of doggerel intimating sexual knowledge of Gibreel's wife: "and then it was time for the return of the little satanic verses that made him mad" (445). This leads Gibreel to murder his wife and kill himself. Recognizing that the story is "the echo of a tragedy," a "burlesque for our degraded, imitative times" the narrator asserts: "Well, then, so be it.—the question that's asked here remains as large as ever it was: which is the nature of evil, how it's born, why it grows, how it takes unilateral possession of a many-sided human soul. Or, let's say: the enigma of Iago" (424). In framing his question this way, the narrator is implicitly recognizing the perennial relevance of Shakespeare's tragedy, even after having reported earlier Chamcha's echo of Thomas Babington Macaulay's famous *Minute on Indian Education* (1835), which called for an educational system in India to create a class of anglicized Indians, when he tells his future wife "that Othello, 'just that one play,' was worth the total output of any other dramatist in any other language" (398).

The narrator goes on to ask rhetorically whether Gibreel and Saladin represent "two fundamentally different *types* of self" (427). Gibreel "has wished to remain, to a large degree, *continuous*" whereas Saladin "is a creature of *selected* discontinuities, a *willing* re-invention; his *preferred* revolt against history being what makes him, in our chosen idiom, 'false'" (427). This is complicated by the fact that:

Such distinctions, resting as they must on an idea of the self as being (ideally) homogenous, non-hybrid, "pure,"—an utterly fantastic notion!—cannot, must not, suffice. No! Let's rather say an even harder thing: that evil may not be as far beneath our surfaces as we like to say it is.—That, in fact, we fall towards it naturally, that is, not against our natures.—And that Saladin Chamcha set out to destroy Gibreel Farishta, because, finally, it proved so easy to do so; the true appeal of evil being the seductive ease with which one may embark upon that road. (427)

Here we have an intrusive narrator discussing his characters with his readers, as could be found in classic omniscience. The moral commentary includes what could be a claim for original sin, our natural state arising from the Fall, but it is made hesitantly with the awareness of postcolonial and postmodern critiques of an essentialized self.

David Foster Wallace, "Octet" (1999)

In both his fiction and nonfiction, David Foster Wallace has deliberately framed his intellectual and aesthetic project as an encounter with the legacy of metafiction. In his 1993 essay, "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace locates himself within a class of "fiction writers as a species," and locates this class in "a literary territory that's gone from Darwinianly naturalistic to cybernetically post-postmodern in eighty years" (151). According to Wallace this new generation of American fiction writers must contend with two interrelated phenomena: the literary influence of postmodern metafiction, and the cultural power of television. The link between the two, for Wallace, is the corrosive power of self-conscious irony and its rebellious critique of any position of authority and sincerity.

Postmodern fiction, Wallace points out, developed at the same time that television assumed cultural ascendancy in America. "For postmodern fiction—written almost exclusively by young white males—clearly evolved as an intellectual expression of the 'rebellious youth culture' of the sixties and early seventies," made possible by the homogenizing effects of television on national culture (182). The failure of postmodern fiction to grapple with the challenge of television, Wallace argues, lies in its inability to transcend a position of ironic distance which television had already adopted: "The fact is that for at least ten years now television has been ingeniously absorbing, homogenizing, and re-presenting the very cynical postmodern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of low, over-easy, mass-marketed narrative" (173).

Irony, Wallace's chief target, is a way of "heaping scorn on pretensions to those old commercial virtues of authority and sincerity" (179), while protecting oneself from this scorn and making the receiver complicit in this stance. So if fiction writers are to reclaim cultural authority from television they must eschew the irony they have become complicit with; the contemporary fiction writer must risk charges of banality and sentimentality in order to separate fiction from its mutually implicated relationship with television fostered by postmodern metafiction. Wallace concludes by arguing that: "The next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of 'anti-rebels,' born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single entendre values" (193).

In this way, like John Barth, he is claiming the need to move beyond an "exhausted" form of experimentation and reclaim some of the traditional territory of authors. However, he understands this as an ethical

rather than technical challenge, and the exhausted form of experimentation he is referring to is not modernism, but the postmodernism championed by Barth. While his long story, “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” with its clear intertextual reference to Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse,” is typically seen as the prime example of this project, I would suggest that Wallace’s short story “Octet” is by far more important and successful. Like “Lost in the Funhouse” and Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, this story stages an agonistic encounter with the process of writing, but ultimately is less concerned with a formalist interrogation of the architectonic structure of fictional narrative and its realist aspirations, than with the nature of fiction as communication. In fact, I suggest, “Octet” can be read as a self-reflexive exploration of the key device of omniscient authority: the authorial narrator’s direct address to the reader.

By virtue of the fact that the narratorial direct address is extranarrative in its function, that is, a pause in the narrative, it has been condemned as breaking the illusion of reality. This is why the direct address, in the form of self-reflexive authorial intrusions, became the most important device of postmodern metafiction and its critique of realist fiction. Wallace’s strategy, in a sense, is to recuperate the sincerity and intrapersonal efficacy of the direct address from its deployment in metafiction as a laying bare of the artifice of fiction. If this artifice, the craft of writing, is laid bare, the story asks, what can be revealed: an empty fictional structure, or the fibrillating self of the “real” author?

While “Octet” is not a typical example of omniscient narration, its authorial narrator experiments with some key features of omniscient authority: reflexively demonstrating his creative power by drawing attention to the fictive nature of the story, addressing readers and discussing characters with them. However, this narrator, as a writer and proxy for the author himself, does not “know” his characters, and the struggle to provide universal commentary or write the story he envisaged eventually takes over the narrative. The story is structured as a series of “pop quizzes,” self-contained but interrelated vignettes in which complicated scenarios of interpersonal relations are presented (the relationship between two drug addicts, between work colleagues, a wife and her son, and between a man and his wife’s family). The questions at the end of each section employ the pop quiz format as a direct address inviting readers to make ethical judgments about the characters’ actions or to surmise their motivations. For instance, the first section, “Pop Quiz 4” about two “late stage terminal drug addicts” concludes with: “Q: Which one lived” (111). Readers are thus encouraged to provide the moral evaluation of characters which is

normally the preserve of the omniscient narrator. The third section, “Pop Quiz 7,” about a “lady” who walks away from a custody battle with her wealthy ex-husband to ensure their child retains access to a Trust Fund, concludes with “Q: (A) Is she a good mother” (114). The fourth section “Pop Quiz 6(A),” about “X” who feels disconnected from his wife’s family because he loathes her dying father whom everyone else worships, concludes with “Evaluate” (123).

The quizzes, however, read like sketchy works in progress, with no character names and operating largely through summary. The second section, entitled “Pop Quiz 6,” makes this provisional nature of the story overt, as it is full of hypotheticals and hesitations. It begins: “Two men, X and Y, are close friends, but then Y does something to hurt, alienate and/or infuriate X” (111). What follows is a narrative based on speculations about what this “something” was, concluding with: “In fact the whole *mise en scene* seems too shot through with ambiguity to make a very good Pop Quiz, it turns out” (113). “Pop Quiz 6 (A)” proceeds to make reference to the “abortive PQ6” (120). Here the narrator is both speaking to himself as he works through the problems of the story and aware of the reader’s “presence.”

In *Towards a Natural Narratology*, Monika Fludernik discusses traditional omniscience in these terms: “To the extent that the authorial narrator exemplifies the laws of human nature on the basis of illustrative case studies of a few human subjects (the protagonists), ‘his’ uncanny ability to know other people’s minds becomes backgrounded and hardly noticeable as an infraction of real-life frames” (124). “Octet” is occasioned by the narrator’s anxiety over his inability to provide these “illustrative case studies,” resorting to the performance of his own anxiety as the exemplification of human nature.

The last section, “Pop Quiz Nine,” becomes an extended metafictional examination of the failure of the piece to realize the writer’s original intention. The authorial intrusion, however, takes the form of a second-person address which simultaneously establishes the narrator of the previous pieces as the narratee and protagonist and, by virtue of its grammatical form, invites the reader to adopt this position. It begins: “You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer. You are attempting a cycle of very short belletristic pieces” which are “supposed to compose a certain sort of *‘interrogation’* of the person reading them” (123). This phrase, “a fiction writer,” echoes Wallace’s references in “E Pluram Unibus” to a subspecies of voyeuristic humans who are representative of the inability to form meaningful relationships which television fosters. Of course the person reading this cycle

of belletristic pieces is the writer himself, who thus becomes a surrogate for the reader. “There are right and fruitful ways to try to ‘empathize’ with the reader,” the authorial narrator opines, “but having to try to imagine yourself *as* the reader is not one of them” (129). The implication is that readers are asked to imagine themselves as the writer. A distinction between narrator and narratee is established in a footnote in the first person: “All I can do is be honest and lay out some of the more ghastly prices and risks for you and urge you to consider them very carefully before you decide. I honestly don’t see what else I can do” (133). This narratee is clearly a fictional version of the authorial narrator—“You’re still going to title the cycle ‘Octet’” (129)—yet it is also clear that the narrator is attempting to address readers through his self-directed apostrophe.

In turning over the problems of the existing pop quizzes, the narrator writes that referring to the aborted Pop Quiz 6 has

the disadvantage of flirting with metafictional self-reference—viz. the having “This Pop Quiz isn’t working” and “Here’s another stab at #6” within the text itself—which in the late 1990s, when even Wes Craven is cashing in on metafictional self-reference, might come off lame and tired and facile, and also run the risk of compromising the queer *urgency* about whatever it is you feel you want the pieces to interrogate in whoever’s reading them. (124)

Here we find the same critique of metafiction which Wallace articulates in his essay on American fiction and television: its own sense of “used-upness” (to use Barth’s phrase). Can meta-metafiction revive this used-up postmodern experiment? We, the reader, are a constant presence in this last section, with phrases such as “whoever’s reading them” referencing the subject position of the reader, while the second person instantiates the narratee.

In *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, Garrett Stewart argues that reconstructing a sense of the nineteenth-century reading public can begin with a formal study of how novels “conscript” their readers through rhetorical invocations of the act of reading. The “Dear reader” trope, he claims, is a “synecdoche for a nineteenth-century literary public initially made available to us through the inferences of fictional reading” (6–7). For Stewart, reading is an “event” enacted in classic realist fiction through two interrelated strategies which “together establish the discursive situation of the reader” (15): the direct address to readers which textually locates them; and scenic descrip-

tions of characters reading which parallel and analogically dramatize the reader's act. "As independent reading agent outside the story, your relegation by text to a delegate of attention within it converts you to either a second or a third person, either an addressee or a character, even if, in the latter case, only 'the reader'" (8).

Stewart traces the "Dear reader" trope from its epic origins to its high point in Victorian fiction, and then its obsolescence as it is outlawed by modernism before it "flares up again in the postmodern involutions of the *nouveau roman*" (33). In this lineage, the direct address is given a new articulation in second-person narration, and in a novel such as Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* which marks "how the epic stretch toward tribal consolidation through narrative is inverted by a postmodern textual circuitry that processes—and so pulverizes—all traces of social space into textual space" (34).

The occasion Stewart offers for his investigation is the decline of literary reading as a cultural activity in the late twentieth century. If the direct address became dated after the "glory days" (5) of the novel in the nineteenth century, then its fate, he implies, parallels that of literary reading itself. An attendant irony is that critical theories of reading emerge at the same time. "Both a vanishing pastime, indeed vanishing craft, and a fading cultural stance, fictional reading has thus been ever more insistently theorized—as if with a certain unsaid urgency, if not elegaic plangency—during its gradual eclipse by other media" (5). Stewart's book was published in the same year as Jonathan Franzen's lament in *Harper's* for the loss of a reading community, and three years after Wallace's essay. "Octet," published three years after Stewart's book, can be placed within his trajectory of the "Dear reader" trope, both addressing the reader and dramatizing the reader by analogy: a second-person address to the writer reading his own draft and wondering how to directly address readers. A footnote in the final pop quiz sets up the story's metafictionality as a problem of the direct address:

Though it all gets a little complicated, because part of what you want these little Pop/Quizzes to do is break the textual fourth wall *and kind of address (or interrogate?) the reader directly*, which desire is somehow related to the old "meta"-device desire to puncture some sort of fourth wall of realist pretense, although it seems like the latter is less a puncturing of any sort of real wall and more a puncturing of the veil of impersonality or effacement around the writer himself, i.e. with the now-tired S.O.P "meta"-stuff it's more the dramatist himself coming onstage from

the wings and reminding you that what's going on is artificial and that the artificer is him (the dramatist) and but that he's at least respectful enough of you as reader/audience to be honest about that fact that he's back there pulling the strings, an "honesty" which personally you've always had the feeling is actually a highly rhetorical sham-honesty that's designed to get you to like him. (125, emphasis added)

There is a reference here to the diminished capacity of the (postmodern) direct address to challenge the (modernist) "impersonality" and "effacement" of the writer. Its reference to Thackeray's puppet master ("pulling the strings") also indicates a desire to avoid the ironic distancing of this narrative voice. The only way to salvage the story, the narrator tells the protagonist (himself/the reader), is to rescue the direct address from the sham honesty of metafiction. "In other words what you could do is you could now construct an additional Pop Quiz—so the ninth overall" (131). You could "address the reader directly and ask her straight out whether she's feeling anything like what you feel" (131). The irony, however, is that the reader is only addressed indirectly, through a version of what Brian Richardson calls the autotelic second person, the "defining criterion" of which "is the direct address to a 'you' that is at times the actual reader of the text and whose story is juxtaposed to and can merge with the characters of the fiction. It is a narrativization of a form of address" (30). Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (which begins: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*") is posited as the exemplar. "Autotelic texts," Richardson claims, "have the greatest share of direct address to the actual reader and superimpose this onto a fictional character designated by the 'you' that tends to be treated from an external perspective as if in the third person" (32).

So Pop Quiz 9 becomes a metafictional reflection on the failed octet which doubles as a direct address to readers asking them whether they think this last pop quiz is enough to salvage the whole piece. Employing the second person encourages the reader to adopt the subject position of narrator who wants to

demonstrate some sort of weird ambient *sameness* in different kinds of human relationships, some nameless but inescapable "*price*" that all humans are faced with having to pay at some point if they ever want truly "to be with" another person instead of just using that person somehow. (132)

This puts the universal comment about “all humans” upfront by performing that “price,” the exposure of the self, in the act of narration.

This attempt at direct communication between writer and reader is compared to the “universal” problem of human relations, the desire for recognition by others: “In fact one of the very last few interpersonal taboos we have is this kind of obscenely naked direct interrogation of somebody else. It looks pathetic and desperate” (131). For metafiction to have any purchase in this goal it must run the risk of desperation. This is the crux of the story, the source of its anxiety as well as its rhetorical gambit:

It may well be that all it'll do is make you look like a self-consciously inebent schmuck, or like just another manipulative pseudopomo Bullshit Artist who's trying salvage a fiasco by dropping back to a metadimension and commenting on the fiasco itself. (135)

The last paragraph of the story reads like this:

Rather it's going to make you look fundamentally lost and confused and frightened and unsure about whether to trust even your most fundamental intuitions about urgency and sameness and whether other people deep inside experience things in anything like the same way you do . . . more like a reader, in other words, down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us, instead of a *Writer*, whom we imagine to be clean and dry and radiant of command presence and unwavering conviction as he coordinates the whole campaign from back at some gleaming abstract Olympian HQ.

So decide. (136)

The narratee as writer is being asked to decide whether he will risk an honest, desperate direct address to the narratee as reader, who is thus being asked whether she actually feels the “queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman sameness” (133) which the author-narrator-narratee does. The final pop quiz then, which asks readers to decide whether the narrator is being sincere, also self-reflexively poses the question of whether postmodern metafiction can be put to service in fiction in the wake of its redundancy. At the same time, the reference to the “Olympian HQ” of the writer is an obvious invocation of a particular figure of authorship associated with omniscient narration, establishing this narrative voice as an exemplar of the ironic moralist. The rhetorical function of this narrator, then, is to ask whether the universal authority of the author to comment

meaningfully on human nature can survive the postmodern critique of this authority.

In *Gendered Interventions*, Robyn Warhol provides a study of the rhetorical strategies by which the narrators of Victorian novels establish relations between readers and narratees, specifically through the direct address to a “you.” In doing so, Warhol distinguishes between “distancing” and “engaging” narrators. A distancing narrator employs the direct address to specifically characterize the narratee, with the effect of discouraging readers from identifying with the subject of the narratorial address. This strategy, which generates an ironic stance from the narrator in relation to the reader, operates by referring to the reader as “a third party,” whether through specific names or the more general term “reader.” The strategy inscribes the narratee as a “flawed” reader by anticipating or warning against misinterpretations, thus establishing variant reading positions which a reader must be careful to adopt or reject; and playfully drawing attention to the narrator’s creative control over the characters and the story being told. Conversely, the engaging narrator seeks to close the gap between reader and narratee, typically addressing a generalized “you,” or collective entities, which readers are more likely to identify with, guiding them to a sympathetic response to the plight of characters, and earnestly asserting the connection between the fictional world and the actual world of the reader. These “interventions” in the narrative discourse are, for Warhol, gendered, with distancing strategies most common in novels by men (Fielding, Thackeray, Trollope), and engaging strategies most common in novels by women (Gaskell, Stowe, Eliot), although she is careful not to claim any essentialist link between the two, and demonstrates overlaps between the strategies.

For Warhol, “all narrative interventions must, at some level, interfere with the illusion of reality” (41), but the over-arching irony of distancing strategies move the realist novel toward metafiction, whereas the interventions of an engaging narrator encourage the verisimilitude of the fictional world in an earnest attempt to effect social change by drawing attention to the social inequalities represented in the novel. Seen in these terms, the use of (in)direct address in “Octet” carries the dramatic and thematic tension of the story: self-reflexively pondering whether the engaging narrator, who is earnest and addresses a public reader, can be regained from the ironic metafictional excesses of the distancing narrator. Of course, in doing so this narrator performs both engaging and distancing functions, moving from isolated direct addresses to readers, inviting their judgment of characters, to the autotelic second person in which the reader and narratee

are collapsed into the subject position of the authorial narrator, inviting judgment of the act of narration. The question is whether these narratorial strategies can be read as culturally gendered in the way Warhol argues they are in the Victorian novel.

It will be recalled that in his essay Wallace equates metafiction with the white male authors of postmodernism. His claim that the post-postmodern writer must risk the charge of sentimentality, the exposure of the self, in a desire for authorial sincerity might then be seen as a gendered critique of the ironic distancing narrator, something which he follows up in “Octet” when the narrator discusses the danger of using “words like *relationship* and *feeling*” (133) in an attempt to engage the reader. The implication is that the writer who steps out from the cover of irony risks feminization. The narrator in fact takes care to refer to the narratee not only as “you,” but, when a third-person reference is syntactically required, as “she.” This replicates the decision many writers take to undermine the universalizing assumption of “he” as the default gender of readers. In this context, though, it also has the effect of gendering the reader:

And then you’ll have to ask the reader straight out whether she feels it, too. . . . Right there while she’s reading it. Again, consider this carefully. You should *not* deploy this tactic until you’ve considered what it might cost. What she might think of you. (133)

The analogy used to explain this cost is instructive: “It might very well make you (i.e. the *mise en scène*’s fiction writer) come off like the sort of person who not only goes to a party all obsessed about whether he’ll be liked or not, but actually goes around at the party and goes up to strangers and *asks* them whether they like him or not” (134). The figure of the writer is gendered male, while the figure of the reader is gendered female, so when the story concludes by stating the only way to save itself from metafictional irrelevance is to be “more like a reader” we can assume that the “Olympian HQ” of the *Writer* is a threatened position of male cultural authority. The final injunction “to decide” is thus freighted with the gender implications of multiple subject positions in the narrative communication model.

In canvassing the possibility of a direct communication between author and reader, the story is designed to provide precisely the sort of “universal” comment on human nature associated with the omniscient narrator: in this case about the fundamental human need for connection and the simultaneous fear of this connection. Rather than asking readers to

identify with the situation of the characters in the story, and guiding their responses, the narrator enacts this “universal” anxiety about human relations at the level of the discourse, so the act of writing fiction, the instance of writing conflated with the narrating instance, becomes the exemplification, in the form of an extradiegetic character, of the universal desire for interpersonal relations.

In her book *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*, Nicoline Timmer characterizes post-postmodern fiction as the attempt by a generation of writers influenced by postmodernism to reconfigure or transform the concept of self inherited from anti-humanist critiques of subjectivity. Locating this impulse in a general move toward the “rehumanization” of the subject in contemporary theory, particularly through the influence of cognitive psychology on theories of narrative, Timmer argues that Wallace is a “key figure in the development of a new ethic and aesthetic in fiction” (23).

Timmer describes “Octet” as one of Wallace’s “fictionalized manifestoes for a new direction in fiction writing, a form of writing that can no longer be adequately labelled ‘postmodern’” (102). In this story, I would add, Wallace experiments with possibilities for recovering the authority of narrators to comment. If third-person metafiction was an ironic revival of the intrusive omniscient author, “Octet” is an agonistic recuperation of the direct address for the purpose, not of moral commentary on human nature, but earnest communication, the author’s desire to speak in his own voice. Yet, the legacy of metafiction for Wallace meant this direct address was still layered in levels of reflexive irony, operating as a dialogue with himself as writer and reader of his failed story.

Adam Thirlwell, *Politics* (2004)

Thirlwell’s insistent narratorial interjections begin to acquire the ring of an over-assiduous tour guide, whose determination to ensure that no detail goes unnoticed removes your liberty to enjoy the view.

—Alfred Hickling, “Actually, I Don’t Like It” 22

A similar anxiety about authorial communication can be found in Adam Thirlwell’s *Politics*. In *The Twentieth Century Novel*, Joseph Warren Beach asserted that there are “three major tendencies of the Victorian novel which have, for good or ill, gone largely out of fashion in the twentieth century” (20). According to Beach:

There is the disposition to be edifying in a moral way. There is the fondness for talking the characters over with the reader, taking sides, and letting the reader know what attitude he should take. And there is the scientific passion for explaining the character, making us understand how the particular phenomenon before us illustrates the laws of human nature in general (20).

Thirlwell, who was included as one of *Granta's* Best Young Novelists for 2003, on the basis of his then unpublished first novel, employs all three tendencies in *Politics*. And it is obvious that in doing so he is grappling with the legacy of metafiction, with the direct address appearing as persistently as a nervous tic as the authorial narrator urges readers not to misinterpret his evaluative commentary: “This is another moment in my novel where you must not let your own private theories affect how you read” (266). The irony of this line is that the narrator offers his own theories on topics from romance to nationalism throughout the novel.

The novel opens with a sex scene in which the protagonist, Moshe, is excruciatingly self-conscious about his performance: “As Moshe tried, gently, to tighten the pink fluffy handcuffs surrounding his girlfriend’s wrists, he noticed a tiny frown” (3). Immediately following this opening line, the narrator forcefully asserts his presence through a direct address: “I think you are going to like Moshe. His girlfriend’s name was Nana. I think you will like her too” (3). During this opening scene, Moshe’s concern about what he thinks “must be the most nervous scene in the history of sex” (10) is interrupted by two pages of narratorial commentary which begins: “I am going to expand a little on Moshe’s problem. It is a universal problem. It is the universal insecurity that one is not universal” (11). The narrator offers an opinion that the genre of the novel can provide solace precisely for readers with this sort of anxiety—“To get over the problem of vanity and other cases of illusion, we have novels” (11)—and asserts that “If Moshe had read this novel, then I think he would have been happy” (12). The narrator then invites readers to compare Moshe’s “universal problem” to their own experiences, before expressing an anxiety regarding his own capacity to provide this solace:

My idea is that you are like this too. Maybe, just maybe, you are not. But I reckon that, at some point in your life, something almost identical to this has happened to you.

Of course it has! This book is meant to be reassuring. This book is universal. It is a comparative study. The last thing I want is for this to be just me. (12)

In these comments we find both a brazen display of diegetic authority and an agonistic lament for extradiegetic authority. The doubt about the capacity of his novel to be universal is a doubt about his capacity to influence readers, later invoking this doubt as a problem of genre: “I know you are not convinced by this. You are unpersuaded. Where is the realism? you say. Where is the accuracy of the European novel. Where is the truth to nature of Balzac or Tolstoy?” (131). The self-reflexivity facilitates an appeal to the subjective personality of the individual writer, relativizing the “universal” authority of the narrator’s omniscience, and personalizing himself as an extradiegetic character to the extent of discussing his own life. “Personally, I think it was a good thing. This is not because I think blowjobs are intrinsically a good thing. Well no, I do think blowjobs are a good thing. I am rarely averse to a blowjob, but that is not why I think that a blowjob was the right thing here” (54).

The narrator is at pains to remind us that his novel is about goodness and kindness, constantly anticipating possible responses to the characters or his comments before replying defensively, most commonly with the qualifying phrase “I think,” oscillating between hesitancy and assertiveness:

Sometimes I think that this book is an attack on sex. Sometimes I think it is prudish. It might be. And if it is, then some people, maybe even a lot of people, will think that this is wrong. They will think that being prudish is indefensible.

But me, I do not think that prudishness is indefensible. I really don’t.
(182)

There is no confident appeal to a general consciousness, but a rhetorical performance of doubt, the need to argue a position, as if unsure of the extent to which readers will be able to enter what Peter Rabinowitz dubbed the authorial audience, defined by James Phelan as: “The hypothetical, ideal audience for whom the implied author constructs the text and who understands it perfectly” (*Living* 213). While Phelan makes a distinction between the authorial and narrative audience, the authorial narrator of *Politics* collapses any interpretively meaningful distinction. The omniscient narrator knows the interior lives of his characters, but as a proxy for the author he can only speculate about his readers. Often this doubt relates to how readers might respond to the explicit sexual nature of the novel: “I am not sure what the general attitude to pissing is. I do not know how most people view pissing as a sexual manoeuvre” (156).

Politics is centered around a “romance” between two young Londoners, Moshe and Nana, and particularly their self-conscious sexual experimentations, which develop into a ménage à trois with one of Moshe’s friends, Anjali. The “comparative study” which the narrator promises works by comparing the situations of his characters to the private lives of real historical personages, from artists such as Andre Breton and Greta Garbo, to political figures such as Hitler and Mao. The ontological plane of the narrator is clearly the same as that of flesh and blood readers, which means that his “knowledge” of the characters must be a product of his fictional invention, rather than a divine quality of omniscience.

For instance, building upon Moshe’s anxiety about his sexual performance, the narrator cites a conversation about sex between key figures of the Surrealist movement in 1928 (the acknowledgements referring to a book called *Investigating Sex: Surrealist Research, 1928–1932*). He then comments that: “I really do not think that Moshe needed to be so flustered by his performance. André Breton, the founder of the Surrealist movement, came in twenty seconds maximum” (60). Commenting on the fact that Nana contracts thrush from Moshe, the narrator points out that Chairman Mao did the same to multiple women:

But maybe there is a more human side to Chairman Mao. Maybe he was just embarrassed. . . . It is not easy admitting to your doctor that you are the carrier of a sexually transmitted disease. Even Moshe found it difficult, and Moshe is a much less public person than Mao. (93)

The narrator also seeks to “universalize” his narrative by drawing elaborate parallels between the sexual politics of the ménage à trois his characters are involved in and real world geopolitical situations. Discussing Moshe’s concern about how the threesome is developing, his need for “more positive signs,” the narrator digresses to state: “In August 2000, the Italian police intercepted some conversations in Arabic between Al Qaeda members” (177). He goes on to express sympathy for those police who did not read these conversations as signs of an impending attack: “It is not easy, spotting clues. In retrospect, everything is so much clearer” (178).

In another chapter, the narrator elaborates Nana’s desire to discontinue her involvement in the relationship by comparing it to the relationship between nation states:

In 1995 the Nobel Peace Laureate, Sir Joseph Rotblat, called for a treaty among nuclear-weapons states. Each state would agree not to be the first

to use nuclear weapons in any conflict. On 5 April 1995, a No First Use Policy of the Declared Nuclear Weapons States was duly signed.

I know that Nana and Moshe and Anjali were not nuclear-weapons states. They were obviously not states at all. So this might seem a little melodramatic and irrelevant. But it is not melodramatic and irrelevant. (228)

He goes on to explain the theoretical flaw of Mutually Assured Destruction: “This type of agreement only works if everyone is feeling threatened” (228). On this basis he establishes a parallel with Nana’s decision to leave the ménage: “Their tacit agreement to stay together had no longer any binding force. It would be no worse for Nana to leave than to stay” (228).

The audacity of the narrator’s self-conscious attempts to universalize the characters’ situations through a “comparative study” is most evident in the parallels he makes with actual historical personages. In one instance, the narrator quotes from a letter Mikhail Bulgakov wrote to the government of the Soviet Union in 1930 before writing: “But, you say, that is entirely different. Bulgakov was living in Stalinist Russia. What is the connection between the pathos and courage of Bulgakov’s letter, and the relationship of Nana and Moshe? Surely I am not saying that the relationship of Nana and Moshe and Anjali was equivalent to living under Stalinism?” (132). He goes on to make a distinction between “totalitarian aggression” and “the use of friendliness as a coercive technique,” concluding that “in terms of friendliness, I cannot see a difference between the individual behaviour of Nana and Mikhail Bulgakov and Moshe and Anjai and Stalin” (134).

The thread of these digressive comparisons is that they establish the political conditions under which people live in Communist states from Stalinist Russia to the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, to Maoist China, inevitably highlighting the conditions under which his fictional characters live. “Moshe’s problem was entertainingly similar to the problem of dissent in a capitalist society. As many left-wing critics have pointed out, it is very difficult to object to capitalism” (206). He goes on to describe Gramsci’s theory of hegemony before asserting: “I, however, have a different theory why no one cares when someone attacks capitalism. You always look like a poseur. . . . Similarly, if Moshe complained that a threesome was not ideal, you would assume he was being hypocritical” (207).

Drawing attention to the moral conundrums at play in a threesome, the narrator asks: “But what is infidelity?” He goes on to discuss the

arrest of the poet Osip Mandelstam in Stalinist Russia in 1934 before commenting: “I am not getting at Osip. Honestly, I like him. Because I like him, I do not want to idealise him too much” (176). Here we see Thirlwell’s intrusive omniscient narrator discussing the motivations of real historical personages in the same way he discusses those of his fictional characters. He does not make these personages characters in the story, they resist fictionalization, yet his evaluation of them exists on the same discursive plane as that of the fictional characters. As a result he self-consciously seeks to parlay the conventional authority of the narrator (complete knowledge of his characters) into cultural authority for the author through the rhetorical performance of universalizing commentary. For instance, the narrator discusses a sexual encounter between Adolf Hitler and the film actress Renée Muller in 1936, in which she was asked to play the role of dominatrix: “Adolf and Renée had just encountered a central human predicament. It is this. Sex is not specific. It is not original. You might think your perversions are all your own, but no. Perversion is general. Perversions are universal. You have to make them specific” (212).

In a review of the novel in *The Independent* Henry Sutton writes that ongoing references to historical situations “are used to highlight various conundrums Thirlwell’s characters are going through. For instance, should Nana be a little less altruistic and a little more self-serving?” Matt Thorne, also in *The Independent*, writes: “the most interesting question his novel poses is whether Moshe, Nana and Anjali are representatives of a generation which has yet to be depicted in fiction.” For me the most interesting question is why Thirlwell’s omniscient narrator so doggedly and self-consciously performs an agonized bid for the universality of his moral commentary. I would argue that the novel in fact is striving to work in the opposite direction: it is an attempt to use the fictional situation of the characters as a parallel to the political situation in the actual world, to explore the inner lives of characters not as the basis for universal commentary about human nature, but as a mode of metaphorical commentary on twentieth-century politics. It is an attempt to assert the authority of the novelist to offer political commentary. “I am not interested in anything so small as the history of the USSR. I am not writing anything so limited. No, what I am interested in is friendliness” (133).

In the last few pages of the novel, the narrator tells us: “And Moshe would come back to her. Of course he would. I know everything. I know Moshe very well” (277). So if the narrator knows everything about the characters, can this be parlayed into knowledge of the world? “This book is universal. I said that at the start. Because it is universal, it is ambig-

uous. It has something for everyone.” (278). Here is the “moral” of the story: “I do not think people are very intelligent about selfishness. I do not think they see how moral it can be. Because it is moral, refusing to be self-destructive. It is a perfectly moral position” (278). The narrator’s selfishness here, his resistance to the “self-destructive” posture of narrative impersonality, is a self-conscious claim for the moral authority of omniscient narration, albeit an authority relativized by an acknowledgement that a general consciousness cannot be invoked. It is an overcompensating direct address.